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Clark Backed Meese For Attorney General

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President Reagan named his long-time counselor, Edwin Meese III, as attorney general after Interior Secretary William P. Clark urged the appointment of Meese rather than White House chief of staff James A. Baker III, administration officials said yesterday.

"There is no doubt that [Clark] tipped the scales," one official supportive of the Meese appointment said.

However, sources close to Baker, while acknowledging that in the past he had expressed interest in becoming attorney general, said he realized as soon as Smith resigned that it was a foregone conclusion that Meese would replace him.

"Any attorney always wants that job, but Baker had been asked by the president to run the campaign and had made his commitment to him," an official close to Baker said.

This official said he considered it likely that the chief of staff would be given a major Cabinet post if Reagan is reelected. However, Baker's supporters said he is more than content to see Meese, his chief remaining rival in the White House power structure, leave for a Cabinet post and give him undisputed authority as the No. 1 presidential assistant.

"He will be the real chief of staff for the first time," one official said.

Clark's intervention on Meese's behalf was the latest episode in a long saga of staff infighting and maneuvering in the Reagan administration.

Conflict between Baker and Clark was a major reason why Clark gave up his post as national security affairs adviser last October and asked

Reagan to appoint him interior secretary after James G. Watt resigned.

When that happened, Baker and deputy chief of staff Michael K. Deaver teamed up in an effort to get the president to install Baker as national security affairs adviser and name Deaver to succeed Baker. But this was blocked by Clark, who called on his old California ally, Meese, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and CIA Director William J. Casey to persuade Reagan to drop the idea.

The president sided with Clark and his allies, reportedly changing his mind after telling Baker and Deaver that their proposal had been accepted.

On Thursday it was Clark's turn to return the favor, and he did so without hesitation, according to officials, who said he met with Meese before he saw the president privately and urged that the counselor be named attorney general.

Neither Clark nor those who supported the action could say yesterday whether the visit was necessary.

Some believe that Reagan would have named Meese, a loyal aide since 1967, to the post no matter what anyone said. Others said that Baker also had a claim on the job and some interest in it and that Clark's support for Meese was important, perhaps decisive.

But Baker's allies expressed satisfaction with the outcome, saying it would make it easier for the chief of staff to coordinate political activities and run a smooth campaign.

"Jim's campaign role in 1984 is vital to the reelection of the president," Deaver said.

Meese's departure is likely to leave a void for conservatives, who have turned to him as their chief conduit to the president after Clark

left. Officials were uncertain how that void would be filled, but some suggested that John A. (Jack) Svahn, director of the Office of Policy Development, would inherit the role of dealing with conservatives inside and outside the administration.

Another possible candidate for this role is Faith Ryan Whittlesey, director of the Office of Public Liaison.

Whoever performs this function,

conservatives are looking ahead to what they believe will be a second Reagan term. Many would like Clark to return to the White House as chief of staff, and the ready access he has to the president, as demonstrated by his meeting in Meese's behalf, is considered a sign that he could do so.

Officials said yesterday that no

decision had been made about who in the White House staff will oversee the policy office run by Svahn, which had been under Meese. Officials said presidential assistants Richard G. Darman and Craig Fuller would get enhanced duties.

Also unsettled yesterday was who will inherit Meese's spacious West Wing office.